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Conspiratorial Thinking: How Worldview and Mortality Salience Affect Belief

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CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING:

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ABSTRACT

Conspiratorial thinking is widespread throughout the world, though the major social sciences have thus far chosen not to study it for a variety of reasons. This study attempts to understand what, in fact, makes individuals believe in conspiracy theories. Using aspects of terror management theory, Kruglanski's (1989, 1990) theory of lay epistemology, participants' political worldviews, and conspiracy type, this paper will explore what triggers conspiracy-prone individuals to see the world the way they do. It is anticipated that individuals who have thoughts of their death primed in their consciousness will structure the world more rigidly, cling to their worldviews and respond to information in a manner which will leave them susceptible to believing conspiracies.

Background

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an event in which conspiracy agents (i.e., people acting secretly in cohort) have a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event that it purports to explain. This explanation must conflict with an "official" explanation of the same historical event (Coady, 2003). The latter part of this definition helps rule out the possibility that an official explanation of the event can qualify as a conspiracy theory. After all, there have been conspiracies that have officially been carried out. The archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian society called The Black Hand. Abraham Lincoln was the victim of as assassination conspiracy. Watergate was a conspiracy and Richard Nixon was involved. Pearl Harbor was a Japanese conspiracy. September 11th was also a conspiracy – a conspiracy concocted by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to attack the United States on its own soil.

Academic research on the subject of conspiracy theories is scarce. This could possibly be in response to the fact that belief in such theories is viewed upon as foolish and illogical (Melley, 2002; Shermer, 1997; Willman, 2002). This view could very well stigmatize any attempt to study conspiratorial thinking in a scientific way. It would certainly be a foolish endeavor to try and refute each and every conspiracy out there, especially considering how strange some of them are. Perhaps the rants of someone like David Icke, who espouses his "Reptoid Hypothesis" which states that many of the

world's current and past leaders are in fact shape-shifting reptilian humanoids that created and control humanity, is seen as too outlandish in which to lend credence. In fact, noted conspiracy theorist and talk radio host Alex Jones has remarked that Icke may, in his opinion, be an agent for the New World Order to undermine the legitimacy of the true one-world government conspiracy theories. However, a number of conspiracy theories often have one belief in common: that a tiny, elite group rules the world from inside a secret room. They start wars, elect and fire heads of state, control Hollywood, the markets, and the flow of capital. Anyone who threatens one's worldview can be placed in place of the words "tiny, elite group"; Jews, the President of the United States, bankers, or the CIA are all potential conspiracy fodder (Ronson, 2002).

Although many people show contempt for those who participate in conspiratorial thinking because of the sheer implausibility of certain theories, it is safe to say that conspiratorial thinking is pervasive in societies all over the world. A Scripps-Howard poll of 1,010 adults in 2006 found that 36% of Americans consider it "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that government officials either allowed the September 11th attacks to be carried out or carried out the attacks themselves (*Time*, 2006). Zonis and Joseph (1994) noted a special prevalence of conspiratorial thinking concerning this event among Muslims in the Middle East. However, instances of conspiratorial thinking can be found concerning just about any major event. For example, there are theories that implicate the British secret service in a plot to assassinate Princess Diana of Wales, as well as theories which state that Diana herself staged her death so that she and Dodi Fayed could retreat into isolation (LondonNet, 2005).

The popularity of conspiracy theories often grows with time, as well as becoming more elaborate (McHoskey, 1995). A national 1992 survey by the *New York Times* showed that a mere 10% of Americans believed the official account that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in assassinating President John F. Kennedy, while 77% believed that others were involved. In 1996, 36% of the respondents in a Gallup poll believed that Oswald acted alone. The percentage was 11% in both the 1976 and 1983 Gallup polls, and 13% in a 1988 CBS poll (*New York Times,* 1992). This increase in belief has occurred despite the fact that evidence has accumulated which increasingly shows support for the lone-assassin theory.

But why should social science care about conspiratorial thinking? What does it matter if a certain percentage of the population wants to believe alternative version of an event? Unfortunately there are some real-world consequences for these beliefs. Beliefs lead to behavior, so it would stand to reason that those who believe in conspiracy theories would behave differently in certain situations than their skeptical counterparts.

A study by Bogart and Thorburn (2004) suggested that African-American men who held stronger HIV/AIDS conspiracy beliefs had more negative attitudes about condoms and were less likely to use condoms consistently. Given the disproportionally high prevalence rates of HIV and AIDS among African-Americans, any barrier to prevention is crucial in the design of effective interventions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). If African-American males are less likely to use condoms consistently, that makes not just one, but two individuals susceptible to HIV/AIDS, not to mention an array of other sexually transmitted infections. This suggests that government

and public health entities need to work toward obtaining the trust of African-American communities and acknowledging the origin of conspiracy beliefs in the context of historical discrimination.

Opinion polls of the international community have suggested that there is not a consensus on who carried out the September 11th attacks. An international poll (WorldPublicOpinion.org, 2008) of 17 countries revealed that majorities in only nine of them believed that al-Qaeda was behind the attacks. This included European countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and England. Populations in the Middle East were especially likely to name a perpetrator other than al-Qaeda.

Another example of belief in conspiracy theories leading to antisocial behavior is the case of a 36-year-old computer programmer named John Patrick Bedell. On Thursday, March 4th at approximately 6 pm, Bedell walked to the entrance of the Pentagon and pulled out two nine millimeter semiautomatic weapons and opened fire on officers Jeffrey Amos and Marvin Carraway, wounding them both. After an investigation, it was discovered that Bedell had previously picked up a conspiracy theory about an alleged murder in 1991 of Marine Col. James Sabow, who was found dead at his home in what authorities ruled a suicide. Conspiracy theorists suggest that this was actually a murder at the hands of the federal government and the case is a cover up. Bedell posted on the internet that exposing the truth behind the Sabow case would be a "step toward establishing the truth of events such as the September 11 demolition" (*New York Times*, 2010).

The fact that so many individuals seem to accept conspiratorial thinking has led me to believe that such thinking is a generalized ideological trait bred from not only the individual, but the situation and context in which the conspiratorial belief is held. I believe that Terror Management Theory, aspects of Kruglanski's theory of lay epistemology, and the ideology of both the believer and conspiracy could be part of the equation.

Terror Management Theory

In answering these queries, I believe Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) provides a complementary perspective on the belief structures of individuals who believe in conspiracies by positing that structured representations of social information are important for maintaining an anxiety-buffer against deeply rooted fears about death. Terror Management Theory [TMT] is based on the assumption that although humans share with all living organisms systems for serving the goal of continued existence, they are unique in their sophisticated symbolic cognitive capabilities. One of these capabilities is self-consciousness. As a by-product of self-consciousness, human beings are burdened with the knowledge that their existence will inevitably end and recognize that these lethal events cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. This knowledge, when intertwined with a predisposition for survival creates the potential for debilitating terror (Landau et al., 2004).

Humans mitigate the potential for the terror that results from this knowledge by developing and subscribing to cultural worldviews. Cultural worldviews are symbolic

conceptions of norms and values shared by members of a group that present a credible and security-providing depiction of reality to the acculturated individual. These worldviews serve as anxiety-buffers against the thoughts of one's mortality by providing a meaningful explanation of reality that imbues people's lives with order, permanence, and stability. The most prominent empirical support for TMT comes from tests of the mortality salience [MS] hypothesis, which suggests that heightening the salience of one's mortality should positively intensify diverse cognitive and behavioral efforts to defend or bolster central aspects of the individual's cultural worldview (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). At the same time, it has been suggested that mortality salience creates more negative reactions to those who violate their cultural norms and values. From a terror management perspective, these negative reactions occur because deviance from the norm implies either that the principles of their worldview may not be universally valid or that the transgressor is evil. Rather than considering the possibilities that their norms and values are invalid, people generally prefer to view transgressors as evil (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). This may explain why the antagonists in most conspiracy theories (politicians, political parties, presidential administrations, corporate bodies, etc.) could be considered political enemies and are elevated to almost super villain status in terms of power and intention.

Kruglanski's Theory of Lay Epistemology

Another comprehensive perspective on the role of social cognitive processes on behavior is Kruglanski's theory of lay epistemology (Kruglanski, 1989, 1990; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). In depicting how individuals arrive at subjective knowledge,

Kruglanski and colleagues proposed a two-stage process of hypothesis generation and validation whereby the individual entertains plausible hypotheses about reality and evaluates them based on available evidence. Because gathering and deliberating every piece of evidence could continue indefinitely, individuals use a satisficing strategy for selecting plausible interpretations that are reasonably consistent with the available evidence (Kahneman et al., 1982; Simon, 1983). Although Kruglanski's theoretical framework acknowledges the role of processing limitations in cessation of hypothesis testing, it posits three independent but interacting epistemic motives. The first is the need for nonspecific structure, which refers to people's desire for *an* answer on a given topic, *any* answer, as compared to confusion and ambiguity. The second is the need for specific structure, which reflects desires for particular conclusions to meet specific needs of an individual, such as conclusions that fit into the individual's worldview framework. And finally, the activation of these needs for structure motivates an individual to bring the inferential process to a close, which leads to "freezing" on the conclusion that best fits the information that has been accessed up to that point.

Neuberg and Newsome (1993) have focused on individual differences in personal need for structure (PNS). They suggested that high-PNS individuals are especially prone to simplify social information, inhibit open information processing and are more likely to close on simple interpretations of social information. Ford and Kruglanski (1995) suggested that those individuals classified as dispositionally high in need for structure tend to rely more on primed trait constructs when interpreting target information. Thus, individuals that are higher on a scale of need for structure could be more susceptible to

closing or freezing on information that is flawed, yet consistent with their view of the world. This may open the individual to believe conspiracy theories.

Belief in Conspiracy Theories as a Result

The compatible theoretical frameworks of Terror Management Theory and Kruglanski's theory of lay epistemology may offer an answer to why people believe in conspiracy theories. The two theories share the view that people often prefer definite knowledge to a constantly expanding set of hypotheses. TMT also agrees with the lay epistemic framework that external factors often induce people to seek epistemically satisfying conclusions. One of the benefits of this freezing strategy could be the role it plays in maintaining a coherent worldview that buffers people from the implicit awareness of their own death.

It is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that social scientists believe that individuals are strongly disposed to organize what would otherwise be an unwieldy amount of information into simplified and coherent cognitive models (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). Limited cognitive resources and active goals compel individuals to selectively attenuate, comprehend, and schematically structure social information. This is usually done by means of heuristics and selectively attending to certain types of information.

Mortality salience as has been suggested to intensify closure on initial information and create a corresponding insensitivity to later conflicting information when forming impressions of individuals and events (Landau et al., 2004). From a terror management theory perspective, closure gained from freezing on an initial evaluation and ignoring

later conflicting information contributes to one's faith in and orderly and stable reality. Landau et al. (2004) suggested that MS intensifies closure on an initial impression and creates insensitivity to later conflicting information when forming impressions of social events. This phenomenon is called confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is an irrational tendency to search for, interpret, or remember information in a way that confirms the individual's preconceptions or working hypothesis (Nickerson, 1998). Studies of social judgment also provide evidence that people tend to overweight positive confirmatory evidence and underweight negative disconfirmatory evidence. Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987) interpreted such evidence as supportive of the view that people generally require less hypothesis-consistent evidence to accept a hypothesis than hypothesis-inconsistent information to reject a hypothesis. Individuals who believe in conspiracy theories unintentionally use this strategy when fitting the conspiracy theory into their general worldview. If a piece of evidence confirms the conspiratorial narrative they have created, that piece of evidence will be used to trumpet the infallibility of their theory. However, if they come across evidence that contradicts their theory, they will either dismiss it or find a reason to decry it as invalid.

Take, for example, the relative popularity of September 11th conspiracy theories. The film "Loose Change," an immensely popular conspiracy film chronicling the events of September 11th, has gone through several different editions, each one attempting to fit newly revealed evidence in with the narrative framework of a conspiratorial nature. *Popular Mechanics* (2005) dedicated an entire periodical to debunking several of the myths, which resulted in a new edition of the film that attempted to either debunk the

scientists who wrote the article or fit each of the pieces of evidence the scientists gave into the framework of the Bush administration destroying the buildings themselves. The directors and editors of the film use clips that aired on news stations on the day of September 11th to back up their claims. Interviews with witnesses who say they heard "what sounded like missiles" colliding with the towers are used to bolster the idea that the government essentially attacked itself.

Mortality salience has also been suggested to exaggerate reliance on representative information. Kahneman and Tversky (1973, 1996) proposed that people tend to overlook objective statistical evidence in forming group membership judgments and rely more on representative information, such that others are assumed to belong to certain categories to the extent that they represent the category stereotype. From a terror management perspective, representative information allows the categorization of others into neat and stable groups, thereby reinforcing the categories that partially constitute one's worldview and viewing those who oppose their worldview more negatively. Most conspiracies in some way or another define the actors within a conspiracy as "good guys" and "bad guys". "Good guys" are fighting for the truth, while "bad guys" are suppressing the truth in order to promote or profit off of their lies. Individuals who have their mortality primed may be significantly more likely to do this and inadvertently create a situation in which they are more likely to ascribe a conspiracy theory as an explanation of an event.

The relative popularity of the myth that vaccinations cause autism is another example. In 1998, Andrew Wakefield, a British gastroenterologist with a history of self-

promotion, published a paper that alleged that the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine caused autism. It was a claim that resonated with parents who brought their child in for immunizations only to find that the next few years were marked with severe social deficits and lack of communication. Parents felt helpless, watching the child they raised retreat into their own little world, and they were never given a satisfactory explanation as to why. After the media took hold of the Wakefield's story, parents of children with autism spectrum disorders suddenly had a ray of hope disguised as a conspiracy theory. According to Dr. Wakefield, children all over the world were being put in harm's way because cowed governments, powerful business and pharmaceutical interests, mercenary scientists and journalists collectively suppressed the truth in order to increase profits (Mnookin, 2011).

According to my model of conspiracy belief, it could be conjectured that the parents had to face a medical decision that had significant bearing on the life or death of their child: vaccination. If they vaccinate their children, the child may retreat within and become unresponsive; if they did not vaccinate their child it would leave them vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. Once parents had an "expert" that empathized with their situation it is no surprise that the idea took hold. Andrew Wakefield reinforced the parents' view that vaccinations cause autism, and in doing so invariably exaggerated the status and expertise of this individual. He also gave parents a list of antagonists to their worldview in which denigrate for their child's condition: pharmaceutical companies, governments, and science. The vaccines cause autism, he claimed, and these big

industries were standing in the way of their child's long, healthy life because they wanted to rake in millions from government funded vaccination programs.

The purpose of the present study is to assess the degree to which conspiratorial thinking is a function of mortality salience, political affiliation, and conspiracy ideology. Students with either conservative or liberal worldviews will be asked to evaluate ten articles, four of which will describe conspiracy theories. Two of the target articles will describe theories consistent with a liberal worldview and the other two will describe theories consistent with a conservative worldview. Half of the participants will undergo a mortality salience manipulation while the other half will not. It is predicted that those participants receiving the mortality salience manipulation will show an increased tendency to believe conspiracies that fit their political ideology and a decreased tendency to believe conspiracies opposed to their ideology. It is also predicted that individuals who are primed with thoughts of their own death in the mortality salience condition will be more susceptible to believe the articles than those in the control condition.

Method

Participants

The participants were 109 individuals of voting age (50 conservative, 59 liberal) recruited through e-mail requests sent to various political organizations and student political organizations. Participants were randomly assigned to the mortality salience condition and a control condition in which they were asked to write about the thoughts that come to mind when they think about dental pain.

Materials and Procedure

The study was conducted using an online survey where the participants were told that they were taking part in an experiment on how people read and understand events. Once the experiment began, subjects filled out a packet of questionnaires. The packet contained the Personal Need for Structure Scale, the Personal Need for Closure Scale, and the Adult Attachment scale as filler items. They were also asked to state their political preference (liberal or conservative), which was used to determine their worldview. The mortality salience treatment (MS) treatment immediately followed the questionnaires. It involved participants responding to two open-ended items: "Please briefly describe the thoughts and emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and "jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead." In order to control for the possibility that the effect of this induction is a reaction to reminders of any adverse experience, participants in the control condition were given a parallel questionnaire with regard to their feelings concerning dental pain.

Participants then completed a word jumble task consisting of 10 neutral words as a delay and distraction before the dependent measure. This was done because MS effects have been found to be strongest after a short period of delay when death-related thoughts are out of focal attention (Greenberg et al., 1994).

After the participants completed the distraction task, they read ten articles in total. Six of these articles were regular articles. The other four articles described conspiracy theories. Two of the conspiracy stories presented conspiracies consistent with a liberal

worldview, while two presented stories consistent with a conservative worldview. Articles that were categorized as "conservative conspiracies" were articles that were believed to be in line with a conservative's worldview. In other words, a "conservative conspiracy" was a conspiracy that a conservative person should find believable, where as a "liberal conspiracy" was one that a liberal person should find believable. Each participant received the packet of ten articles in a randomized order. The six control articles covered general topics involving the United States. They concerned Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, the U.S. Constitution, the Environmental Protection Agency, The Iran Hostage Crisis, the first Gulf War, and Rosa Parks. The first target article that fit within a liberal worldview described the Project for the New American Century (a neoconservative think-tank) and their efforts to create a one-world government based on right wing conservative principles. The second liberal target article described a conspiracy that states that the oil companies' theory of "peak oil" is a farce determined by oil companies, giving them the leverage to gouge customers. The first conservative target article described how the global warming "industry" invented and perpetuated the view that anthropogenic global warming is occurring in order to gain large grant funds and make people less apprehensive about being taxed. The second conservative target article described how President Barack Obama kept the death of Osama bin Laden a secret in order to perpetrate a sort of "October surprise" due to his flailing popularity numbers.

Participants were asked to respond to three multiple-choice questions about each article they read. They were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 6 how clear and concise the

writing was and how much the participants believed the information contained within the article. For a participant to completely believe a story, they would mark it a 6. If they were to consider the story to be completely fabricated, they would mark it a 1. The participants were instructed to complete the materials at their own pace. They were fully debriefed upon completion.

Results

Participants' ratings of the believability were averaged over the two liberal and two conservative articles to form a believability index for each type of article. The believability scores were subjected to a 2 (mortality salience) x 2 (participant ideology) x 2 (article ideology) analysis of variance. Results showed a significant main effect of type of article (Liberal vs. Conservative), $F(1, 105) = 12.32$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .11$, with liberal articles ($M = 4.62$) being rated more believable than conservative articles ($M = 4.05$). The main effect of participant ideology (Liberal vs. Conservative) was also significant, $F(1, 105) = 5.66$, $p < .02$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .05$, showing conservatives found the articles more believable ($M = 4.72$) than did liberals ($M = 4.00$). The main effect of mortality salience was not significant, $F(1, 105) = 1.05$, $p = .31$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .01$.

The analysis also showed that all three two-way interactions were significant: type of article by ideology, $F(1, 105) = 19.67$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .16$; mortality salience by ideology, $F(1, 105) = 5.66$, $p < .02$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .05$; and mortality salience by type of article, $F(1, 105) = 5.65$, $p < .02$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .05$. Bonferoni corrected post hoc tests showed that liberals differed from conservatives in their ratings of believability for the conservative articles (liberal $M = 3.39$, conservative $M = 4.82$) but did not differ from

conservatives in their ratings of the liberal articles (liberal $M = 4.62$, conservative $M = 4.63$). These tests also showed that liberals (MS $M = 4.49$, control $M = 3.52$) were more influenced than conservatives (MS $M = 4.50$, control $M = 4.89$) by the mortality salience manipulation. Finally, post hoc tests also showed that mortality salience only influenced believability ratings for the liberal articles (MS $M = 5.02$, control $M = 4.29$). Mortality salience had no effect on believability ratings for the conservative articles (MS $M = 3.98$, *control* $M = 4.10$).

Although the three-way interaction did not reach significance, $F(1, 105) = .28$, $p = .60$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .003$, further exploration of the data suggests that the two-way interactions involving mortality salience were largely a function of the fact mortality salience only seemed to influence liberal participants' ratings of liberal articles. As can be seen in Table 1, conservative participants were non-significantly less likely to believe both liberal and conservative articles when their mortality was made salient. Liberal participants' believability ratings tended to go up when mortality was made salient, but this increase was only significant for liberal articles.

Table 1. The Effects of Mortality Salience on Believability Ratings Partitioned by Ideology and Type of Article

Participant	Article	MS Mean	Control Mean	*t value*	*p value*
Conservative	Conservative	4.43	5.10	-.19	.85
	Liberal	4.57	4.67	-1.29	.21
Liberal	Conservative	3.65	3.13	1.39	.17
	Liberal	5.35	3.91	3.44	.001

Discussion

The present study attempted to demonstrate the moderating role of mortality salience on the relation between participant ideology, article ideology and the perceived believability of conspiracy theories. It was hypothesized that participants of either political ideology in the mortality salience condition would be more likely to believe articles proposing conspiracy theories, specifically when their ideology and the article's ideology matched. The findings did not support this hypothesis. Interestingly, participants who identified as conservative were more likely to believe the conspiracies overall, while liberals only showed increased believability in the liberal articles in the mortality salience condition. Thus, the behavior of liberal participants tended to match predictions while conservative participants were not influenced by mortality salience. Reading liberal conspiracies were the only group that followed the expected trend.

In addition to our predictions, we found that for the particular articles used, the liberal articles tended to be more believable. In addition, conservatives were generally more likely to believe the articles than were liberals. Thus, it appears that conservatives paid very little attention to the ideological position expressed in the article and were simply more likely to believe the conspiracy theories. An interesting, and counterintuitive finding was that conspiracy theories oriented in a liberal direction were generally believed more than conspiracy theories oriented in a conservative direction.

Despite these interesting results, there are numerous limitations to the present study. First, the articles may not have been accurately representing the intended worldview. The variables of a "liberal," "conservative," "liberal conspiracy," and

"conservative conspiracy" can be used more generally in the real world than was used in the present study, especially considering the targets in the conspiracy articles. Political affiliation was used broadly in the present study, even though there are several different types of "liberals" and "conservatives". For example, it is possible that self-described liberals can have reservations about the theory of global warming and were conflicted about how to answer the question of believability.

Another limitation to the present study is the possibility that the conspiracies just did not align with the political affiliation they were thought to be. For example, someone with a conservative worldview may reject the theory of "peak oil" due to reasons that are not encapsulated in the target article. It is entirely conceivable that a liberal could feel the same way about "big oil". The frustrations experienced between citizens and corporations could potentially cross political parties. Instead of having individuals self-describe their political beliefs, perhaps they should have rated their liking of different possible target corporations, companies or politicians to compare to their believability ratings.

Although my hypotheses were only partially supported, the results suggest some directions for future research. First, it might be worthwhile to explore whether conservatives would always find any conspiracy associated with centralized government more believable. One aspect of current conservative notions in the U.S. is that government is "too big" and is trying to control too many aspects of everyday life. This general belief may lead conservatives to distrust government and, thus, more likely to believe any conspiracy theory involving government. Thus, future research should use a wider variety of conspiracy theories that do and do not involve government as part of the

theory. It might also be interesting to assess whether other types of "irrational" beliefs are associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories, or if such theories hold a unique place in the belief structures of those people who find tent to find them convincing. There are many avenues for research in this area and I hope these results lead researchers to consider following some of these avenues.

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